

TRANSITIONS, TRANSFORMATIONS AND TRADEOFFS: PROTECTING AND STRENGTHENING SOCIETAL RESILIENCE AND COHESION

Reflecting on the 18 months since Koi Tū's launch

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Futures

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KOI TŪ: THE CENTRE FOR INFORMED FUTURES

We are an independent and non-partisan think tank and research centre based at the University of Auckland with associate members across New Zealand and the world.

We undertake transdisciplinary research and analysis and generate knowledge, commentary and tools to address critical long-term national and global challenges arising from rapid and far-reaching social, economic, technological and environmental change.

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AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND'S CHALLENGE

New Zealand's post-colonial history points to a culture generally dominated by short-termism and a "she'll be right" attitude. Indeed the 'number eight fencing wire' mentality has become embedded in our national identity, implying that we can always find a solution to whatever problem comes our way without thinking about the long term. But this belies reality. Our geographic isolation and our relatively stable economic history as a food bowl has served us well. Until now, most Pākehā New Zealanders have not confronted existential threats. Sadly, Māori have faced many existential challenges following European colonisation, including high death rates from introduced infectious diseases, particularly in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

However, we know we cannot isolate ourselves from the pressures and realities of our globally connected world. Beyond the pandemic, we must address the climate crisis, environmental degradation, and how to live with rapidly evolving and often disruptive technology while considering how we sustain and diversify our economic development for a healthy future. As a country, we also face multiple internal pressures, including demographic change and a long history of intergenerational disadvantage, which left unattended, will increasingly threaten our societal cohesion.

These pressures were on us well before the Covid-19 pandemic reached our shores. We must find a way to address this complex web of challenges. At the same time, we must continue to embrace an increasingly diverse population while honouring our bicultural origins and commitments as a nation. Indeed, an evolving national endeavour to develop a model of a society that is at once both bicultural and multicultural has been pursued with varying levels of determination in recent years by successive governments.

As the global disruption caused by the pandemic rolls on, it is increasingly clear that Covid-19 has accelerated pressures on many fronts. We have discussed many of these challenges in our reports over the past 18 months. Their primary intent has been to promote discussion about our future, recognising the need for inclusive, multifaceted discourse on the many national issues we must contend with. The issues are difficult and complex. They will generate many diverse views that need to be engaged in authentic deliberation to build a coherent sense of direction that will survive beyond the vagaries of the political cycle. However, the nature of New Zealand's political system with its unicameral chamber, weak select committee structures and too-often shallow media coverage can make engaged and evolving discourse challenging, particularly as we do not have a strong tradition of openly discussing contested values and world views in a constructive manner. Koi Tū is looking into ways to address this deficit.¹

TRANSITIONS, TRANSFORMATIONS AND TRADE-OFFS

The 21st century has thrown up a constant stream of challenges, from climate change and environmental degradation to the consequences of greater global connectivity – which, among other things, has allowed for rapid viral spread. The internet and social media are now creating an environment that catalyses intentional misinformation. Ahead lies the potential for the emergence of far more disruptive technologies. Further complications lie in the extreme fragility and dysfunctionality of the multilateral rules-based system, which developed after the second world war in what was then essentially a unipolar world dominated by the United States. To address the challenges to the global commons, the multilateral system needs to be strengthened or rebuilt, but geopolitical considerations have impeded even the most obvious changes. New Zealand's unparalleled reputation might suggest it

1 See: <https://www.complexconversations.nz/>

could take the lead in steering the needed reforms. However, this involves navigating a highly complex geopolitical landscape where our trading relationships, historical interests and our commitment to being a good global citizen (prioritising human rights and values) do not always align.²

Covid-19, along with many other societal transformations, has taken a toll on society as a whole but also acutely on the resilience of individuals. In the current tumultuous environment, multiple stresses undermine the mental wellbeing of too many in our society, especially youth. The latter is a critical issue that we must confront if we are to remain a cohesive society.³ New Zealand cannot tackle any of these multiple transitions and transformations ahead without understanding, engaging, accepting and utilising the diversities within our society. New Zealanders' complex and diverse identities, worldviews and values need to be sensitively understood and broadly discussed across a wide range of issues.

When considering the challenges and opportunities, we also need to openly acknowledge the inevitable trade-offs inherent in any policy choice. In general, we have not been very good at doing so.

VALUES, WORLDVIEWS, IDENTITY AND COHESION

The evolution of human societies over the last 100,000 years, particularly since the dawn of organised settlement 10,000 years ago, has enabled us to live in relatively cohesive and defined social groups. This evolved through compartmentalising functions and roles within each society and the acceptance of a variety of governance systems built on common mores, rules and behaviours and circumscribed social identities. Today, many societies face significant challenges to their cohesion and resilience. As diversity of worldviews and values mix, they can bring a richness of experience and innovation but they can also increase polarisation as identities collide.

In the Pākehā world, we have seen a shift from identities defined 200 years ago rather rigidly by class, religion, race and micro-geography, to a much more complex array of multiple and coexisting identities that have suddenly been expanded further by the virtual world. For indigenous communities, identities which in past eras were defined by culture, family, village and tribe, have since had their identity defined by colonisers. Many, including Māori, now face challenges of reviving and sustaining their cultural identities while at the same time being engaged broader identities in the modern world.^{4,5}

With today's multiplicity of values and worldviews, how is societal cohesion built and maintained? Regrettably, this complexity has produced many examples around the world where societal cohesion has broken down, leading to human, economic and social tragedy.⁶

Societal cohesion in a democratic and non-authoritarian society can be defined by two dimensions. The first is vertical – referring to the level of reciprocal trust between members of a society and the institutions and individuals that govern them. The second dimension is horizontal – which also relies on trust but is defined by the ability of different groups within that society, with their inevitably disparate world views and values, to cooperate constructively for societal good. In addition to trust, societal cohesion is underpinned by respect and constructive dialogue between these different components of the society. The vertical and horizontal dimensions are intimately linked and interact, and both are always vulnerable.

2 Allen, J., et al. (2020) *New Zealand's Place in the World: the implications of COVID-19*. Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/new-zealands-place-in-the-world/>

3 Poulton, R., et al. (2020). *Protecting and promoting mental wellbeing: Beyond Covid-19*. Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/protecting-and-promoting-mental-wellbeing-beyond-covid-19/>

4 Mankiller, W. (2009). Being Indigenous in the 21st Century. *Cultural Survival Quarterly*.

5 Singh, P. (2018). Global configurations of indigenous identities, movements and pathways. *Thesis Eleven*. 145(1): 10-27.

6 Garroway, C. and J. Jütting (2011). *Measuring cross-country differences in social cohesion*, OECD.

Although it may be difficult to achieve cohesion in a highly diverse society, such cohesion is essential for that society to be resilient to both internal and external pressures.^{7,8,9} A resilient society can adapt and continue to thrive in the face of change because its members are willing to work together in support of the common good. In a time of very rapid, multi-dimensional transitions and transformations, the importance of sustaining cohesion has become even more critical. Where it breaks down, we have seen gross abuses of power and potentially terminal threats to democracy. The persistence of such drivers of discord, including racism and inequity, can fuel greater polarisation and even greater loss of harmony both on the streets and in the corridors of power. This has been on display in the United States in recent years. Where polarisation is fuelled in the context of fear and anger, the risks of violent extremism are enhanced.¹⁰

TRUST AND COHESION IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

New Zealand remains relatively privileged in terms of cohesion and trust, but we cannot be complacent. Pressures, strains and potential threats to our social fabric must not be dismissed. We must put continual effort into a more strategic and futures-focused approach to our situation.¹¹

Vertical trust is generally high between New Zealanders and their government.¹² This has been true for many decades and has been significantly enhanced by the political leadership demonstrated during the pandemic. But beyond a crisis, which itself can be unifying, vertical trust is ultimately dependent on truth, transparency and clarity of decision-making – not only in outcome but in the processes employed to reach it. It includes ensuring that stakeholders and their interests have been considered and consulted, and in that process, being open about the requisite trade-offs involved. Around the world, Covid-19 has allowed many democratic governments to become more autocratic in their decision-making than would otherwise occur. This has been highlighted as a worrisome and potentially infectious trend.¹³

In a sense, New Zealand could be viewed as undertaking a grand national experiment, founded on the bicultural ideals of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (although this has been poorly implemented for much of our post-colonial history) while at the same time welcoming an extraordinarily diverse range of migrants over the past 180 years. The inevitable tensions arising between a bicultural and multicultural agenda make it critical for us to think about how to sustain societal cohesion across the horizontal domain. We must be wary of unilaterally defined solutions to problems, wherever they arise, as these are likely to give rise to tension, which will ultimately undermine cohesion. The challenge is that New Zealand has not been very good at discussing values-based issues publicly – indeed our structures for doing

7 Fonseca, X., et al. (2018). Social cohesion revisited: a new definition and how to characterize it. *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*. 32(2): 231-253.

8 Jewett, R. L., et al. (2021). Social Cohesion and Community Resilience During COVID-19 and Pandemics: A Rapid Scoping Review to Inform the United Nations Research Roadmap for COVID-19 Recovery. *International Journal of Health Services*. 51(3): 325-336.

9 The converse may also be true – resilience of a society's institutions in the face of crises and change may also contribute to the cohesiveness of that society. See: Aall, P. and C.A.Crocker (2019). *Building resilience and social cohesion in conflict*. Global Policy. 10(Suppl.2): 68-75.

10 McNeil-Willson, R., et al. (2019). *Polarisation, violent extremism and resilience in Europe today: An analytical framework*, BRaVE; Building Resilience against Violent Extremism and Polarisation.

11 Spoonley, P., et al. (2020). *He Oranga Hou: Social cohesion in a post-Covid world*. Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures.

12 See: Public Service Commission, Kiwis Count survey – <https://www.publicservice.govt.nz/our-work/kiwis-count-survey/>; World Economic Forum – http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_TheGlobalCompetitivenessReport2020.pdf; Transparency International, 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index (NZ perceived least corrupt) – <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/nz>

13 See: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege>

so are almost absent. Yet, the rapid rate of multidimensional change within our small nation makes such discussions even more imperative. Contrast this with countries like Finland, where there are multiple processes funded by the State, but independent of it, that are designed to ensure national conversations, social innovation, and robust consideration of the future.¹⁴

HONEST CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE

There is a growing list of issues that in all likelihood cannot be well-resolved through our short political and news cycles and the increasingly identity-focused politics seen in many democracies. They include our changing demography, the possibility of constitutional change, the role and effectiveness of local government, the management of rapidly emergent technologies, growing inequality and the access to and provision of quality social services, human development, intergenerational disadvantage, environmental degradation and resource use, climate change, our productivity gap and its broader economic implications, and our relationship to a multipolar and conflicted world. We also need to resolve what education should provide to our young citizens, an increasing proportion of whom will be living into the 22nd century. What will rapidly emergent new life science and digital/quantum technologies do to the ways we live our lives and fuel the economy? These are among the many matters in urgent need of careful attention.

New Zealand's multiple infrastructure crises are a clear manifestation of our chronic inability to plan for the long term¹⁵. The Climate Change Commission and the Infrastructure Commission are but a start to filling this gap with broader and longer-term analysis to promote discussion about our way ahead. In our report *The Environment is Now*¹⁶ we pointed out that New Zealand has not set explicit goals under the broader sustainability agenda as encapsulated in the Sustainable Development Goals, and that there may be a place for a broader Sustainability Commission. Meanwhile, we continue to explore ways to better honour our State's bicultural origins and commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi on the one hand, while on the other, accommodating and celebrating the multicultural reality of New Zealand in the 21st century.

The multiple issues of Auckland, for example, highlight the challenge of our current democratic form. Citizens are largely disengaged, as reflected in the low voter turnouts at local body elections. It is not clear to many Aucklanders who makes the critical decisions that can affect the way they live their lives. Practical matters like housing, transport, jobs and persistent low incomes have become perceived by many as 'wicked problems' with no solution.

How should democracy evolve in a world where technology and new institutional forms offer innovative opportunities to engage in discussion with different groups and cohorts within a society? Experiments in deliberative and participatory democracy are common in other countries, yet the favoured approach to consultation by the institutions of government remain relatively tokenistic and too often rushed.

Even if each of the issues alluded to earlier might be called a 'wicked problem' this does not mean that pathways forward cannot be found and agreed upon. Policy-making is always a matter of making choices between options that affect the various stakeholders in different ways. There are inherent trade-offs in all policy-making and the implications of these need to be understood by all stakeholders. Scientifically-derived evidence alone does not resolve such problems because empirical evidence rarely

14 See: This is Finland – Social Innovations. <https://finland.fi/tag/social-innovations/>

15 Gluckman, P. and A. Bardsley (2021). *Uncertain but inevitable: The expert-policy-political nexus and high-impact risks*, Kōi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/high-impact-risks/>

16 Bardsley, A. et al. (2020). *The Environment is Now*. Kōi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/the-environment-is-now/>

can address the issues of values, worldviews and identities which shape how each citizen perceives and evaluates a problem. Rather, robust knowledge can help to inform and define the options and accompanying implications and consequences. Ultimately, analysis and discourse must engage with citizens and their diversity of values, worldviews and identities.

THE ROLE OF KOI TŪ: THE CENTRE FOR INFORMED FUTURES

Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures was established as a strictly non-partisan, futures-focused and impact-driven entity. The overarching framing of our work is societal resilience in the face of social, technological, economic, environmental and geopolitical transitions and transformations. Our focus is on the substantive long-term issues affecting New Zealand's future, and we do not generally engage in the immediate issues of the political cycle.

Koi Tū has in its first 18 months engaged some of the best thinkers both nationally and internationally on many key questions, including:

- What will the post-Covid-19 reset bring for New Zealand?¹⁷
- What will New Zealand's place be in the in a post-Covid-19 world?¹⁸
- How will New Zealand's economy evolve?¹⁹
- What will our food sector look like in a future increasingly focused on sustainability?²⁰
- And how will we sustain our unique natural environment for generations to come?²¹

The issues of social cohesion²² and mental health²³ have been the subject of significant and continuing reflection. We have explored why evidence-informed risk assessment can be ignored by the policy community and we have developed some very productive partnerships, most notably with Ngāti Whātua Ōrakei, who gifted us the name Koi Tū.²⁴

We have encouraged a plurality of thinking rather than being constrained by ideology. We have deep partnerships with relevant international agencies and organisations. Koi Tū is more than a think tank – we engage where appropriate in empirical research and in thinking about how our work can best have an impact. Generally, answers lie with both policy makers and with civil society, including the business community and citizens. This requires posing the questions in a way that is informed by transdisciplinary perspectives and evidence.

17 Gluckman, P. and A. Bardsley (2020) *The Future is Now: Implications of COVID-19 for New Zealand*. Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/the-future-is-now/>

18 Allen, J., et al. (2020) *New Zealand's Place in the World: the implications of COVID-19*. Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/new-zealands-place-in-the-world/>

19 Greenaway-McGrevy, R. et al. (2020) *New Zealand's economic future: COVID-19 as a catalyst for innovation*. Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/nzs-economic-future/>

20 Bardsley, A., et al. (2020) *The future of food and the primary sector: the journey to sustainability*. <https://informedfutures.org/the-future-of-food-the-primary-sector/>

21 Bardsley, A. et al. (2020). *The Environment is Now*. Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/the-environment-is-now/>

22 Spoonley, P., et al. (2020). *He Oranga Hou: Social cohesion in a post-Covid world*. Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/social-cohesion-in-a-post-covid-world/>

23 Poulton, R., et al. (2020) *Protecting and promoting mental wellbeing: Beyond COVID-19*. <https://informedfutures.org/protecting-and-promoting-mental-wellbeing-beyond-covid-19/>; Menzies, R. et al. (2020) Youth mental health in New Zealand: Greater urgency required. Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/youth-mental-health-in-aotearoa-nz/>; Low, F. et al (2021) Intergenerational disadvantage: Why maternal mental health matters. Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/intergenerational-disadvantage-why-maternal-mental-health-matters/>

24 The name means to stand tall; to be the sharp point of the arrow, moving into the future

Transdisciplinarity is a specific research process which can address wicked problems.^{25,26,27} While the term is frequently misused, it has two critical components. First, whatever the question or issue, it must be framed through multiple perspectives in parallel, recognising that the process of asking the question itself is part of finding the solution. Secondly, in doing so, it must engage all stakeholders from the outset.

Our team is deeply experienced in public and policy engagement and our skillset spans social, natural and technological sciences. Importantly, we are genuinely committed to the principles of true transdisciplinarity, with a strong underpinning of future-focused systems thinking, harnessing the rich toolkit of futures studies and foresighting, and engaging the full range of knowledge disciplines.

I thank the many academics and experts, both within and beyond New Zealand, and the many stakeholders from civil society, who have contributed to Koi Tū's work in its first full year of operation. Similarly, NGOs and policy agencies of central and local government have contributed to our thinking. Most of all, I thank the Koi Tū team, its Board, our rangatahi group and the donors who have generously supported us.

25 Gluckman, P., et al. (2020). *Transdisciplinarity and Universities: a path ahead*, Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/transdisciplinarity-and-universities-a-path-ahead/>

26 Kaiser, M., et al. (2020). *Good information is required for good decision-making: Why transdisciplinarity matters*. Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/why-transdisciplinarity-matters/>

27 OECD (2020). *Addressing societal challenges using transdisciplinary research*. OECD Science, Technology And Industry Policy Papers, OECD Publishing.



**KOI TŪ:
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HELP CREATE AN INFORMED FUTURE

We engage with people and organisations focused on the long-term development of New Zealand, and on core issues where trustworthy and robust analysis can make a real difference.

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